

OPINION

Helping your child comfort a grieving pal

By [HEIDI STEVENS](#) | Chicago Tribune

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Shortly before Christmas, a brother-and-sister duo whom my kids play with lost their dad unexpectedly. It's the sort of tragedy that you never want young kids to experience, but to have it happen so close to Christmas made it all the more cruel.

I wanted my own kids to comfort their friends, but at 11 and 7, I knew they'd need a little coaching.

It can be difficult at any age to know what to say to a friend who's coping with a death, and I don't want my kids to become avoiders — those people who disappear when someone's struggling because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing.

I fumbled my way through a reminder that it's kind and important to say, "I'm sorry about your dad" and to take their friends' cues from there.

"They might want to talk about it," I said. "They might want to talk about anything *but* that."

That seemed like enough at the time, but it got me thinking about how little we talk about this particular parenting topic. Certainly our kids will watch their friends deal with heartbreaking circumstances, probably more than once during childhood. How do we help them be of the most use to their friends?

I called John Duffy, my go-to guy for parenting matters of the heart. Duffy is a clinical psychologist and author of "The Available Parent: Expert Advice for Raising Successful, Resilient, and Connected Teens and Tweens" (Viva Editions).

"It's almost like a family crest," Duffy told me. "This is what we do. It might be uncomfortable, but we reach out. We do the thing that's going to help the other person, even if it causes us discomfort."

I love the idea of framing it as a family value that you decide upon and live by. We show up. We help. We listen. We push aside our own awkward feelings, because our own awkward feelings aren't the point.

Duffy has counseled kids who've lost parents and siblings, and the worst thing, they tell him, is when their friends avoid them afterward.

"They feel like pariahs," Duffy said. "They feel like people are crossing the street or ducking into the other aisle at the grocery store because they don't know what to say."

Too often we assume the person grieving has a very specific idea what he or she wants or doesn't want to hear, and we fear we'll say the opposite. Duffy said he counsels a brother and sister who lost their dad last year, and they talk about that dynamic.

"They say, 'People expect us to know what to say or do, like we're experts. But we've never lost anybody before,'" Duffy said. "They feel like they have to take care of people, instead of people helping take care of them."

That goes for the adults in their lives too.

"The boy told me, 'I feel like my friends handle it better than most of my mom's friends,'" Duffy said.

But we can help our kids break that cycle.

"One option is to have your kid say, 'Do you want to talk about it, or do you want to just hang out?'" Duffy said. "That's sort of ideal. And if the friend wants to talk, tell your child to just listen." You can also play on the natural directness that comes from being a kid.

"It's even OK to say, 'I'm really sorry. I don't know what to say,'" Duffy said. "I've had kids tell me, 'Just say something. Even if it's wretched, we can laugh about it later. It's when you say nothing that I feel like you're not there for me.'"

He recommends running a few ideas by our kids until we land on something that feels natural (natural enough, anyway), and then rehearsing it if they're game.

It might feel forced, but family values can be worth forcing. When I was fumbling through this conversation with my own two, in the back of my mind, was the fear that they'd worry their own dad (or mom) could suddenly die.

I asked Duffy whether to address that outright, and he said absolutely.

“You want to reassure them pretty quickly that mom and dad are fine,” he said. “And be open to any questions they have. Shutting down that conversation can develop that fear into a phobia, where a child can’t get it out of their mind. You want to give them a wide enough berth to continue talking about it if that’s something they’re inclined to do.”

Every child has unique predilections and fears, and some kids are more comfortable around matters of death than others. Of course, that should all be taken into account when you’re deciding your own family’s value here.

But it strikes me as loving and powerful to learn, early on, how to say – and to mean – “I’m so sorry” when friends are struggling. It doesn’t erase their grief, but it reminds them they’re not alone in it.

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